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The national geography curriculum for basic education in Portugal: theory and practices by geography teachers

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Abstract

Centered on issues related to the National Geography Curriculum for Basic Education in Portugal this paper explores the (re)interpretations by Geography teachers trained at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto in the implementation of the National Curriculum, that is, in their teaching practices.

Keywords: Curriculum, Curricular interpretation,Teaching practices, Teaching of the Geography;

1. Introduction

In Portugal in the beginning of this century, curricular changes took place at the level of the Basic Education. Regulated by the Decree - Law No. 6/2001, of 18th January, the Curricular Reorganization of Basic Education laid down a National Curriculum for this level of education, and it is organized around general competences and educational experiences to be provided to students. Specific competences for each subject were also identified and the Geography Curriculum Guidelines were draw up in the line with principles and guidelines of the National Curriculum pointing to a significant breach in the way the curriculum is designed and the role of the teachers.

Since its implementation until today, at initial teacher education level, working documents were produced by the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto reflecting the interpretation of the documents issued by the Ministry of Education. These documents were shared by students, future teachers and also supervisors in the training sessions and our aim was help to prepare them, in addition to have specialized in Geography, must now also become curriculum designers and managers.

After nearly a decade of the generalization of the Geography National Curriculum, this paper questions which directions and meanings are embedded at the level of teaching practices. In this framework we want understand as the curriculum guidelines for Geography, as well as the (re)interpretations accomplished within The Geography Department's Initial Teacher Training Programme, are influencing and being interpreted in practice by teachers.

Thus, this paper begins with a very brief reference to the Portuguese Education System and the context of the subject of Geography in Basic Education Schools (3rd cycle – 12-15years old). In a second point, the article places emphasis on the Initial Teacher Education for Geography student teachers at the Faculty of Arts of University of Porto. In a third point we give account of our empirical research that consisted request class diaries from six basic

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school teachers, with the intention of learning more about the practices they follow. Their discourses were analysed using the content analyses method (Bardin, 1979). The fourth point section of this paper presents the results obtained. Lastly, we present our final considerations.

2. Portuguese Educational System and the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography

Before framing the subject of Geography at Basic levels, we briefly present the organization of the Portuguese Education System, particularly with regard to the school education system. This consists of the three levels: Basic Education, Secondary Education and Higher Education. Basic Education is compulsory, taking students through nine years of schooling, and is organized into three sequential cycles, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd cycles. The 1st cycle last four years (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades), the 2nd cycle is spread over two years (5th and 6th grades) and, lastly, the 3rd cycle, for a length of three years (7th, 8th and 9th grades). The Secondary Education is structured into three years of school and Higher Education is also organized into three cycles, each conferring respectively a first degree [Licenciatura], a Master degree and a PhD degree. Secondary and Higher Education were not covered in this paper.

In the 1st cycle, Geography contents are taught under the heading "Estudo do Meio" [Environment Studies, which cover the subjects of Science, Geography and History] and in the 2nd cycle, contents, are integrated in History and Geography of Portugal. The subject of Geography is autonomous at the 3rd cycle of Basic Education, and is included in the field of Human and Social Sciences. Together with History, it shares a weekly workload of 90-minutes class periods in the 7th grade and two and half class periods in the 8th and 9th degrees.

With the Curricular Reorganization of Basic Education implemented in 2001 the National Curriculum was to be seen as a set of essential, general and specific, competencies, and as learning capabilities witch must be offered to the students throughout this level of education. A total of 10 general competences were defined that are to be developed gradually throughout basic education in all curricular areas. According with the National Curriculum, the formulation of specific competences in Geography took into account "an inclusive perspective of attitudes, abilities and knowledge that are to be developed by the student through geographical education" (ME,2001:17). The intention is that young students should acquire at the end of Basic Education, a set of competences that make them competent in terms of Geography. According to the Ministry, "the geographically competent citizen can master spatial skills and shows that he/she is capable of: visualizing facts in spatial terms, relating them; describing correctly the environment he/she lives or works in; developing a mental map of that environment; using different scale maps; understanding spatial patterns and comparing them; having a good sense of terrestrial orientation" *(ibidem*). Further to these spatial skills, a geographically competent citizen "can also interpret and analyse critically geographical information and understand the relation between territorial and cultural identity, heritage and regional individuality"(*ibidem*).

Throughout the teaching-learning process, teachers are expected to foster educational experiences with a view to developing skills related to research. To this end, they must be encouraged to conduct experiences in which students can learn how to observe, record and process information, raise questions, formulate conclusions and present findings. Geographical skills are to be developed through both fieldwork and group work, which favours the promotion of ideas and the production of conclusions. Teachers may organize the teaching-learning process however they consider most appropriate to the contexts of their school and class, providing students with the opportunity to carry out activities that allow them to develop the know-how to contemplate space and become actors in the environment they live in.

Geographical education should be such that students can learn how to reply to a number of questions, for instance: Where is it located? Why is it located there? How is it distributed? What are the characteristics? What is its impact? How should it be managed for the mutual benefit of humanity and the environment? The search for answers to geographical questions implies research on location, situation, interaction, spatial distribution and differentiation of phenomena on the earth's surface.

The official documents define the grouping of competences into three fields: Localization, Knowledge of Areas and Regions, and Dynamics of Interrelations among Areas.

The subject should therefore be developed around an organizational theme "Towards the Discovery of Portugal, Europe and the World", which the six major thematic areas laid down in the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography, evolve around.

These six major thematic areas – "Earth: Studies and Representations", "Natural Environment", "Population and Settlements", "Economic Activities", "Contrasts in Development" and "Environment and Society" – can be offered in a sequential and/or integrated manner, but the first theme "Earth: Studies and Representations" must always be the first to be studied. For each of these themes, a set of sub-topics was identified proposing a number of educational experiences to be developed with students, but that is not of a compulsory nature. According to the Curricular School and Class Project, teachers can organize other experiences assuming the role of curriculum managers. Such management should focus more on the interpretative aspects of several different educational experiences than the descriptive aspects of programme contents. In addition, the objective for geographical education is that students learn to apply concepts of space, place, region, territory, environment, location, geographical scale, geographical mobility, interaction and movement, leading to the development of a set of competences that allows them to learn to observe and conceive of space as well as to be actors in their environment.

Not only can teachers manage the topics/sub-topics and educational experiences, but they can also manage the study analysis scale. This scale should be selected so as to evince the geographical phenomena to be studied. In each programme topic, teachers can use the analysis scale that is most appropriate to the respective phenomena, but the studies should always refer to the reality in Portugal so that, by the time students complete the Basic Education level, they are aware of the geography of their country and know how to compare with another reality, similar to and/or in contrast with the local, continental and global scales according to the phenomena in study. It is important that students completing Basic Education understand that geographical phenomena, physical and human factors are inter-related in a dynamic way, originating different spatial repercussions. It is important that teachers, based on actual cases (which can be a place, a region or a country) and case studies, guide students into interpreting and recognizing phenomena that occur on the face of the Earth.

3. Initial Teacher Training in Geography at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto.

The Faculty of Arts of University of Porto has, since 1988/89, fostered initial teacher training, namely in the area of Geography. The curricular units covering specific educational training were called Methodologies of Teaching of Geography, Curricular Managements in Geography, Didactic of Geography, Analyses of Learning in Geography. In these subjects, students were made aware of the relevance and specificity of geographical Education, with the problems related to the curriculum management and with teaching and assessment methodologies. They came into contact with the National Curriculum and Guidelines for Geography. Initial teacher education always had in view an analysis and interpretation of the educational and curricular policies. Preference was always give to training teachers with the ability to know, interpret, understand and reflect on curricular phenomena, that is, the aim was to train teachers as builders and managers of the curriculum. The focus was centred on a teacher education that allowed teachers to gain insights providing the ability to configure curricular situations adapted to contexts that characterize the school and construct actual views of teacher professionalism.

It has thus been a constant in our attention towards teacher education policies and aspects that privilege, above all, the construction of a curriculum understood as a process that involves a set of actors, at the same time implying construction at intentional level and de-construction at the practical level.

At the time the *Currículo Nacional do Ensino Básico. Competências Essenciais* and the Geography Curricular Guidelines (3rd cycle) were published, the lecturers of the Department of Geography of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Porto who were involved in initial teacher education started to develop an analysis and interpretation of the National Curriculum which not only relapsed in the sense of student teacher education, but also in relation to teachers that monitored them at school, the Trainee Supervisors.

This knowledge production was then presented, discussed and worked on together with students and privilege was give to gaining awareness of the pertinence and specificity of geographical education, curricular management, teaching methodology and also student learning assessment.

In the analysis, the focus was centred on the Curriculum Guidelines for Geography – 3rd cycle. Proposals for didactic scripts, year planning and didactic unit were presented. These proposals were organized around educational situations aggregative in the intention of contributing to an integrated management of the curriculum guidelines. The analysis also proposed changes to the specific competences of Geography in a perspective of functional simplification. In view of curricular flexibility, there was an attempt to breach the classical logics of mere

sequencing of ways to organize and manage the curriculum. The guidance followed was to focus our work on curricular development, which is now expected to be a generator of competence development.

4. Empirical Research

As we mentioned in the introduction of this paper, insofar as the National Geography Curriculum has been implemented for some years now and diffused throughout the country, it was important to produce knowledge about National Curriculum, the Curriculum Guidelines of Geography and the interpretations made at Faculty of Arts have been taking shape.

In this sense and in order to highlight the practices that are been experienced in schools by Geography teachers six alumni and former trainee supervisors were invited to write three class diaries each, corresponding to three consecutive lessons (one per week), for a teaching unit. The unit fell under the subtopic "Mobility" within "Population and Settlement", usually taught in the 8th grade. After the meeting, an electronic file was delivered to teachers in order for them to draw up the class diaries, facilitating the writing and the subsequent collection of information. All teachers joined this research study and 18 class diaries were collected, as initially estimated.

In each diary, the teachers would have to list their activities at the level of planning and teaching each lesson, following the line of thought of Zabalza (2004:13) when he says that diaries "are documents in which teachers write down their impressions about what is happening in their classrooms" and because "diaries can be used more strictly for research purposes (as a resource designed to boost the knowledge available in the educational field)" (*idem:* 16).

The information obtained from class diaries was treated by means of content analysis, which enabled handling the copious and extensive information and testimonies in a methodical manner following certain rules, as well as extract comprehensive data other than previously expressed. In other words, this research study applied a qualitative analysis, since the purpose was to interpret teachers' real situations in their practices. Following what is defined for content analysis, categories were set up which enabled us to grasp the apprehension of meaning of the discourses. The aim was to bring out the meanings of the material itself, based on the empirical data for the classification that best suits the objectives which justify this research procedure, seeking to understand how teachers (re)interpret the curriculum.

5. Results

A total of 18 class diaries were analysed and interpreted with regard to the organization, management and teaching. In relation to the organization and management of curriculum development, it seems evident that there are teachers who predominantly organize the teaching-learning process by designing strategies and resources conducive to student participation according to a behaviourist/technicist orientation, and there are teachers who organize it by designing strategies and resources conducive to the promotion of participation following an orientation that seeks students' emancipation and free initiative.

In the first case, the teachers plan and organize lessons based on handbooks and workbooks, resorting to correction of homework and lessons in notebooks as well as revision of subjects taught in previous lessons. Based on the records, one can assume vertical dialogue is characteristic of the communication between teachers and students, since teachers expect to resort to procedures that are based on explanations, problem solving and summary schemes for the consolidation of knowledge. As for classes, teachers direct the action using the provided resources and strategies and resorting to vertical dialogue.

In the second case, we identified a teacher who plans lessons based on the students' own experiences and identifies strategies for simulation and role-playing which encourage a more active involvement of students in class. In this case s/he eventually engages students in research activities and uses their previous conceptions and representations related to the subjects to be learned anew.

Based on the results obtained, a few inferences can be made. The first has to do with the concern of teachers putting into perspective an education in which they take on the role of organizers of learning situations. Considering this role, the teachers involved in this study underline a conception of education associated with transfer of knowledge through vertical dialogue, focussing on contents of the Geography subject without ever referring to procedural and attitudinal contents. They strictly discriminate thematic contents, the resources used and the activities

developed, never addressing the assessment of the process or of the results generated by education. When organizing the teaching-learning process and teaching, the geographical and general competences to be developed by students were never mentioned. Occasionally however, they prepare and develop didactic moments in the classroom in order to develop the research procedure. Nonetheless, in most classes, it is the teacher who directs the action while the students play a less active role, more oriented towards the reception and understanding of what is being taught.

Conclusions

As the National Geography Curriculum was designed in a more open rather than prescriptive model, the development of noticeable dynamics regarding a curriculum design that considers that which is prescribed at national level is a project that needs to undergo a significant curriculum redesign at local level so as to adapt to the characteristics of the context and students who experience it. Teachers were not supposed to make a (re)interpretation of the National Geography Curriculum focused on the acquisition of knowledge, but instead on competences development. However, this does not seem to be very clear. Based on the analysis of data from the class diaries, one can see that there is a predominant concern for exclusively working out thematic contents, leaving aside the design of educational situations that may favour the development of procedures and attitudes that can also mobilize knowledge, thus creating opportunities to develop geographical competences. Hence, it seems that the teachers involved in this study developed a less active role in curriculum management than expected, by not adapting the curriculum to local realities and not making use of the autonomy that was given to them in the National Curriculum. Thus, practices related to transfer of knowledge apparently still predominate, a situation that deviates from a student-centred teaching practice and compromises the construction of their own learning processes.

It is possible to inferred that, at least with these teachers, the teacher's role as mediator between the curriculum designed at national level and the curriculum as actually experienced locally, are not being totally appropriated and the National Geography Curriculum are largely being (re)interpreted as a normative curriculum to be followed supposedly in a similar manner in Geography classes, regardless of the context. As this study aims to analyse the extent to which the curriculum designs laid down by educational policies at the beginning of this century are being implemented, one can conclude that there is still a *décalage* between discourse and experience, a situation that highlights the need to develop the study of situations producing more generalizable knowledge and capable of indicating paths of intervention.

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